Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Pink Snowberries: The Last Taboo
Roland G. Mertens
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Three Stars (out of Five)

In his startling new memoir, Pink Snowberries: the Last Taboo, German author Roland G. Mertens chronicles his incestuous relationship with his daughter Sonia. Beginning in 1981 and ending in 1992, this saga is an account of the couple's relationship, the birth of their two children, and the custody battle that ensued. The book also includes historical, legal, and cross-cultural information about the concept of incest. Prefacing the narrative is a poem by D. H. Lawrence, called "Elegy," in which the speaker laments being separated from his lover, while the moon interacts with the stars "like a white bird among snowberries." Perhaps the bird symbolizes Mertens, and the pink snowberry symbolizes his daughter, but this comparison is never made explicit.

Mertens tells his story in the first person, giving readers direct access to his opinions and feelings. The tale flashes back to Mertens collecting Sonia from a German hospital after she has a mental breakdown and continues to their eventual estrangement and her taking custody of their sons. The major players are: manipulative Mertens, who lets his desires cloud his judgment; consensual Sonia, who possesses an acquiescent nature and volatile bouts of mental illness; Mertens' initially supportive ex-wife, Hedy, whose opinions change throughout the affair; and the boys caught in the middle—Sonia's brothers, Gerhard and Arno, and the couple's sons, Roy and Keith. Mertens is skilled at depicting his family members as multi-dimensional people. His dialogue, letters, and court documents place the audience in the middle of the action. He shows how a single issue can polarize loved ones and presents a sad, haunting depiction of Sonia's bipolar disorder.

Although Mertens asserts that "incest among consenting adults is a victimless event," the evidence offered here shows the ways that his family was victimized by incest. Mertens blames Sonia's actions on her treacherous femininity and her mental illness. He further victimizes her

by taking advantage of her docility. By blaming Sonia, the author refuses to acknowledge his own culpability. The couple's sons are also victims because of their unstable home life; Sonia eventually puts them in foster care in favor of her new daughters, claiming she can no longer cope with these boys from an incestuous relationship. Lastly, Mertens himself is a victim; he never knew his sons were going into foster care, and he hasn't seen them in years.

Throughout the book, pertinent information is unfortunately relegated to footnotes, such as status updates about Roy and Keith, and first-person testimonies from another father–daughter couple who made headlines in 2008. The included research on the evolution of incest reads like a textbook and seems shoehorned into the narrative.

Pink Snowberries is recommended for readers drawn to taboo subjects, realistic depictions of mental illness, and the dangers of manipulative parents.

Jill Allen